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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000444

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC AND EUR/PGI, ALSO OES AND MED
DEPT PLEASE PASS USAID FOR GLOBAL HEALTH MURRAY TROSTLE
ANKARA FOR AGRICULTURAL COUNSELOR
ROME FOR FAO REPRESENTATIVE
GENEVA FOR HEALTH ATTACHE
TBILISI FOR USAID; ALSO PASS A/S FRIED
HOMELAND SECURITY COUNCIL FOR RAJIV VENKAYYA AND KEN STALEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/22/2016
TAGS: [KFLU](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [EAGR](#) [TBIO](#) [CASC](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: WHO CONFIRMS 5 AVIAN INFLUENZA CASES IN AZERBAIJAN

REF: BAKU 402 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM JASON P. HYLAND; REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 21, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that UK reference laboratory tests showed that five deaths (reftel) in Azerbaijan were caused by H5N1 avian influenza. Testing confirmed two additional H5N1 infections; one patient recovered and has been discharged from hospital, while a second girl remained hospitalized in critical condition. Two additional patients from the Salyan and Neftchala regions were also hospitalized with suspected bilateral pneumonia; testing is underway. According to WHO, a total of 19 cases of suspect illness, including the five deaths, are under investigation. A five-person WHO team on the ground has implemented an aggressive human surveillance program and is working to improve the GOAJ's still weak public education campaign. FAO has identified two of the three experts it plans to field to Azerbaijan, a critical step to mitigate the GOAJ's unacceptable veterinary response.

USAID has now begun a project with the State Veterinary Committee, and has deployed a veterinary expert who is recording a series of public service announcements on avian influenza. Embassy AI working group reviewed post's AI tripwires March 17; Post plans to release a warden notice following WHO's March 21 announcement. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On March 21, the WHO issued a statement indicating that reference laboratory testing in the UK showed that H5N1 avian influenza caused five recent deaths in Azerbaijan (full text at www.who.int). Four of the five deaths (17-year-old female, 20-year-old female, 16-year-old male, and 17-year-old female) were in Azerbaijan's Salyan region, while the fifth (21-year-old female) was in Terter region. All of the Salyan cases are reportedly from the same family unit, extended family, or persons in close contact with the same family. In addition, the WHO statement indicates two additional confirmed H5N1 cases from Salyan region: a 10-year-old boy who has recovered and a 15-year-old girl currently hospitalized in critical condition. In addition, two other patients, one from Salyan and one from adjacent Neftchala region, are now hospitalized with symptoms of bilateral pneumonia; testing on these cases is underway. The WHO statement indicates that the source of the infections is

under investigation. Not surprisingly, there are multiple stories depending on which source is consulted. The Minister of Agriculture claimed to DCM March 15 that no large poultry die-offs were reported in Salyan region. He indicated that the family in question had been involved in illegal hunting and harvested down from migratory birds as a family business. He surmised that this was the source of infection. However, a visiting FAO expert told Econoff March 16 that his visit to Salyan had yielded reports of backyard poultry die-offs throughout the area.

13. (SBU) For the past two weeks, the World Health Organization has had a team of five international experts in Azerbaijan. Reports indicate that they are working well with the Azerbaijani Ministry of Health. Emboffs met on March 16 with two representatives of the WHO's international mission to Azerbaijan. These representatives reported excellent cooperation from Ministry of Health colleagues. Other areas they highlighted:

-- In the Dayikend settlement of the Salyan Region, WHO has implemented an active, aggressive human surveillance program. To date, 4,200 people have been interviewed in door-to-door searches. The active surveillance will continue until 14 days after the final suspect case is resolved. The WHO's chief epidemiologist is working with local doctors, who actually head the surveillance teams, to ensure a rigorous process;

-- The WHO team planned to travel to the Terter region, where the fifth H5 death was confirmed, to assess the local response and determine what next steps are necessary;

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-- As the Ministry of Agriculture's veterinary response had posed significant challenges for their own work, the WHO representatives said they would push FAO to dispatch immediately to Azerbaijan at least two experts for a two month term. (NOTE: FAO regional representative told Econoff March 22 that FAO planned to send three experts to Azerbaijan. A veterinary epidemiologist (already identified) would serve for six months, a communications specialist (already identified) would work for six weeks in cooperation with UNICEF, and a laboratory technician (to be identified) would serve four weeks in the GOAJ's veterinary lab. END NOTE.);

-- One of the five members, a communications specialist, was working directly with the MOH on a media strategy. The WHO team noted that public communication was sorely lacking and only fueled rumors and confusion. The goal was a daily "bulletin" system to control rumors and to have a central repository for information.

-- The WHO continued to work with on the sampling issue, particularly with the supplies (i.e. packaging boxes) needed to ship samples to international labs. Based on Post's experience facilitating sample shipment, Emboffs stressed how critical a large supply of sample containers was for rapid testing of suspect cases.

14. (C) The WHO representatives reported a disturbing finding that in Salyan, where multiple cases of H5N1 avian influenza, including four deaths, were identified, Azerbaijani veterinary officials were still telling people that there is no avian influenza in birds. According to interviews done by WHO with local residents, many were told by veterinary authorities that absent AI in birds, the only way that the virus could have been contracted in humans would be through human-to-human transmission. The WHO representatives also expressed a great deal of frustration with the Ministry of Agriculture, specifically with the Veterinary Service. (COMMENT: While there has been no definitive laboratory finding on whether poultry or wild birds in Salyan have AI, most of the anecdotal evidence Post has heard would make it

likely that fowl in Salyan are infected with avian influenza.
END COMMENT.)

15. (SBU) Although the WHO response is improving, the sole impetus for public outreach on avian influenza continues to be the international community. However, these efforts are beginning to take hold. Combined UNICEF/MOH PSAs are now running on television, with airings of these AI PSAs often followed by a tantalizing GOAJ message promising free treatment for tuberculosis cases. Whether simply happy coincidence or ingenious design (we suspect the former), the combination of messages may encourage the public not only to protect itself properly, but also to come forward and seek treatment immediately should a suspicious illness present itself. At the same time, Post continues to follow our initial television and print campaign with more work to increase public awareness. Most recently, USAID and its implementing partner Pragma are filming a number of short clips using a visiting U.S. veterinary specialist on how farmers should properly handle poultry. Post plans to disseminate these clips widely. Finally, the Ministry of Education has already distributed to schools around the country UNICEF-prepared information on avian influenza.

16. (SBU) Post's AI working group met March 17 to review our AI action plan and tripwires. The working group determined at that time that no further actions were required, but that Post would continue to monitor the situation carefully. Post had issued a warden notice and embassy-wide management notice on March 14, following the first confirmation of H5 in humans, which cautioned the American community on the human cases and steps required to avoid contracting AI. Following WHO's March 21 press release, Post will issue a follow-up warden message to the American community March 22.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: We are greatly encouraged by the presence

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of the WHO team; it includes people with both the technical knowledge, experience, and acumen to make positive changes. While FAO's response has been very slow, we are also encouraged by the commitment to send long-term experts to Azerbaijan. As the number of cases continues to grow, Post strongly supports the deployment of more international experts to a front line of the international community's fight against avian influenza in a country whose government response has been poor, and medium- and long-term needs for capacity building are extensive. Given the ongoing weakness of the GOAJ's veterinary response, and the challenge this inaction poses for human health efforts, experts in veterinary services are particularly useful. With people continuing to fall ill, however, there is also great need for clinicians that can augment the WHO presence, in Baku as well as in the regions, to ensure patients receive proper treatment quickly. Finally, in the midst of battling new cases of AI in humans and fowl, there is still a need for forensic epidemiologists to investigate regions, such as Massali and Ganja, where large birds die-offs, and rumors of human illness, have never been fully investigated. As the WHO and FAO slowly come around, the reality in Azerbaijan remains that much more money, supplies, and expertise are needed. Post appreciates Department's ongoing efforts to lobby FAO, WHO, EU (which has been surprisingly disengaged, apart from contributing to a World Bank facility), and others for the support Azerbaijan needs to meet this crisis. END COMMENT.

HARNISH